"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

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Effective Techniques in Developing Unity and Cooperation among Rural Churches *

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By Mark Rich**

Anyone who looks with realism upon the American rural church scene recognizes that some power of far-reaching effectiveness needs to be introduced to revitalize town and country churches. Some say that inter-church cooperation is the answer to this need. The common reason they give is that the religious climate in rural fields demonstrates the need, by negative and positive means, for a more unified and expansive church program. The commonly named negative elements are well known.

Among many churches there is little regard for denominational traditions and distinctions. The major evangelical churches in most communities speak in one voice. Few have a distinctive witness. Why should there be three weak churches in one village to proclaim the identical message? Even in those vast areas where denominationalism is still very strong, the loyalty to denominational enterprises appears to be breaking down. Hymn books are purchased from Gospel song houses and Sunday school supplies from David C. Cook or some other non-denominational publishing company. Young people have no more loyalty to the denominational college than to the state college. The theological and social emphases frequently have no relation to the historic denominational tenets. Many smaller rural churches are complacent and inefficient and need to be imbued with some lifting power which they are not now receiving through denominational channels.

A positive element pointing toward cooperation is the fact that in some sections of the United States, particularly in the East, there is arising a conviction that inter-church cooperation is an essential emphasis and expression of the Christian religion in our generation.

The desire for Christian unity is not new, and many types of approaches have been made toward realizing this end. The Council of Jerusalem, recorded in the Book of Acts, and the Council of Nicea in the early centuries represent attempts to bring about unity in the church by achieving uniformity. Probably the majority of Christian people still erroneously conceive conformity in belief and ecclesiastical practice as essentials for cooperation and unity.

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Zahnizer indicates three varieties of efforts for unity. The first is the come-back-home type which has been the call of the Catholic church throughout the years to its dissenting groups. The second is the forsake-all-your-false-doctrines-and-accept-ours type which is the call of the Protestant denominations to those who hold other views. The third is the leave-them-all, come-out-and-join-us type which was advocated by Alexander Campbell and others of his kind.

Another form of cooperation may be called "escapist." It commonly is expressed like this, "It doesn't matter what one believes. I would just as soon join one church as the other. They are all equally good." This type is called "escapist" because the expression so commonly comes from people who have no specific religious convictions and use this argument as an alibi to escape responsibility in any church.

Another is the non-sectarian sect. Recent years have seen the rise of a number of so-called non-denominational groups who welcome into their fold people from any or all denominations. They boast of their non-sectarianism. I attended such a service last summer, during which the preacher made this heated statement: "I would like to poke my fist down the throat of the ministers who do not believe this,"--(a doctrine of regeneration). While he may have been non-denominational in his affiliations, he represented the very essence of sectarianism in insisting upon the necessity of adherence to an approved theological point of view.

None of these methods of achieving unity have been very fruitful because they fail to recognize certain elements essential to cooperation and unity.

As one examines the efforts toward church unity in rural areas, there appear to be two general types that are working with more success than are the others. The first is the method of comity by which fields are assigned to individual denominations. This type of cooperation represents cooperation between church administrators for the good of the community and the convenience of executives. There is usually a minimum of local action. This type of cooperation is most effective in the so-called mission areas where one denomination through withdrawal of funds can recall excessive missionaries. In such instances and in the trading-of-churches plan, fields may be cleared to provide an adequate opportunity for one denomination which will minister to all people of the area, even those with varying theological preferences. This plan is generally not effective where churches have been long established and local tradition is strong.

For such communities a type of cooperation is effective which may be described as the unity-in-diversity and diversity-in-unity type. This kind of cooperation presupposes a variety of theological opinions and ritualistic preferences among the members of the churches. Cooperation is achieved through agreement on the central fact of Christ and in the fellowship of Christians in His service. This leaves the question of interpretation to a secondary position.

In America a variety of forms of inter-church cooperation have been born out of this philosophy. Associate membership is the first step by which a denominational church grants fellowship and partial privileges to those

with other affiliations. The open membership plan grants full privileges to members of other denominations without asking them to give up their points of view on creed, ritual and other Christian doctrines. The community church is built upon the supposition that members of the various denominations have enough in common to make possible a community fellowship of Christians about the central fact of Christ and the need of Christian service to the community.

The federated church recognizes the contribution that denominational churches make to the community and seeks to preserve and strengthen these bonds and ties by bringing two or more churches into a common fellowship and program. It does not require that the people change their ways of thinking except as thoughts are changed by taking part in common worship and service. Such churches are sometimes called "two-in-one" or "three-in-one" churches in recognition of denominational units which work together as one body.

The larger parish places first the spiritual needs of the people of an area and second the differences in interpretation. Basic to its philosophy is the belief that varieties of thought on Christian doctrine should not deprive children, young people and adults of the right of having a spiritual nurture which the church can provide. Beneath and more basic than theological opinion is the hunger of the soul for the good and God. Points of view on Christian truth are important but the fellowship of Christian people and churches with diverse opinions is more essential.

It is chiefly with these various forms of unity-in-diversity and diversity-in-unity types of cooperation that we are concerned. For this is the kind of cooperation adapted to the situations among established churches such as are found in our rural communities. Moreover, we shall not consider methods of bringing into being a larger parish, a federated church or any other united or cooperating church. We have already seen that the form of cooperation is relative to the situation. We shall therefore attempt to do a more important thing, which is to point out those elements essential in a technique for bringing about any form of unity-in-diversity and diversity-in-unity cooperation. Of these elements we shall name seven.

1. <u>The Survey Element</u>

Advocates of church cooperation not infrequently make the mistake of identifying unity with a certain organizational pattern. The result has been the over-emphasis of form at the cost of principle. Thus, some persons may have a veritable mania to put in force a specific form of cooperation. With some it is meat and drink to recommend the community church for every situation regardless of conditions. With others it may be the federated church and some think the larger parish the panacea for all rural church ills. But, let it be recognized that there is no one ecclesiastical pill with a full guarantee to remedy all ailments. There are several forms of inter-church cooperation, each native to particular situations. A most important element in every effort toward inter-church cooperation is a survey through which facts are determined about population, community, churches, financial and human resources, attitudes and program. Such a survey will indicate the type of cooperation best adopted to the situation. A safe rule to follow is, "Get the facts first; then decide upon the form." Such a sur-

vey need not be a complete community survey, but should search out only those facts relevant to the immediate end in view.

2. The Start-Where-You-Can Element

Under this heading, I speak to those whose task it is to foster church cooperation in a state or region. We sometimes fall into the error of advocating advanced steps in cooperation without regard to time, place and condition. Like it or not, many places in rural America are not ready for advanced steps in inter-church cooperation. To enter such a community with plans for federation or a larger parish will bring results no better than are gotten by a goat who butts an immovable wall. But scores of places are ready for some kind of cooperation. What they need is proper guidance. These are the places on which to concentrate. Any good strategy asks that workers harvest fields "white unto harvest" and not the green sprouts of spring. The movement toward unity would grow by leaps and bounds if attention could be paid to the churches that are ready to work together. Other fields can be cultivated in an elementary way and be left until Christian grace and loveliness have had more time to leave their influence.

3. The First-Step Element

The start-where-you-can element applies to selecting communities in which to organize cooperation; the first-step element refers to the actual procedure in organizing. Inter-church cooperation has so consumed the imagination of many a pastor and layman that it has led them to idealize the perfect state when all churches of a community will work together in harmony and sublime goodwill in an integrated program of community service. Who has not dreamed these dreams and seen these visions? They are made of the stuff that inspires religious awakenings and new movements.

But, alas, too often these dreams lead away from reality. Leaders forget that the ideal is reached only by slow, short steps. They want to go the whole way in one step. But, unless these first steps are taken, the final one will not be taken.

Only last week I visited a community in which there have been efforts toward the union of two historic churches. But there have been no results and bitterness and bickerings have arisen. What had been done? The weaker church made a proposal to the stronger church that both bodies deed their property to a third denomination not represented in the community, and that both churches affiliate with this new denomination. That is cooperation through giving up old identities and traditions and the taking on of a completely new identity.

Did the two churches get together that way? Anyone knows the answer. No! Because it was a proposal altogether out of line with their tradition and a much longer step than most people, rural or urban, are willing to take.

Later a second proposal was made by some members of the dominant church. They said, "We will be glad to have the other church close out and bring their members into our church." Let me ask, "Did this proposal meet with favor?" Again, anyone experienced in rural and human ways will know the

reply. No! Only when in the struggle for existence, this church finally is compelled to close its doors will a few of the thick-skinned members creep into the surviving church despite the furtive glances of the hosts which convey the thought, "You finally had to give up and come over. We knew you would come to it."

All efforts toward the integration of the work were fruitless because proposals involved such long steps that no one would take them. That community needed to be shown how to take short steps. Fortunately, the two pastors recognized that. Without raising the question of formal cooperation, a combined vacation school was held. A preaching mission was conducted with good results, and a Sunday evening prayer meeting (mostly singing) met with an unusual response. The churches began working together in other ways and the people liked it.

Time seemed ripe for some further action. A joint committee which had been appointed, but which had remained inactive, was called together with outside counselors. As a result a proposal was laid before both churches that during the cold, winter months the two churches meet together for Sunday services and for as many activities as would be deemed advisable. Even this may prove to be too long a step but, with good guidance, the people are probably ready to go that far. If this one is taken, others can follow later when the people want to take them.

It can be demonstrated that most progress has been made in areas where first steps have been taken first, and least where an attempt has been made to take last steps first. How often progress has been sacrificed on the altar of the goddess-of-the-last-step-first.

This theory of first-steps first grows out of the necessity of halting the forces of opposition and conflict between churches and for inducing cooperation and goodwill. These attitudes grow through slow nurture and must always precede the organizational adjustments which may be necessary to express the relationships of goodwill.

4. The Starting-With-All-Groups Step

A fourth element in a technique for church cooperation is that of starting with all groups concerned. A plan, be it ever so perfect, which originates in the mind of one person, or of one church, is not likely to be adopted by the others involved. That is a law of human nature. Inter-church cooperation succeeds best where all the churches involved are called together to consider a proposition from the making of the first plans to carrying them out.

5. The Educational Element

The educational element is another vital factor in bringing about unity among rural churches. Bringing two or more churches to the place where they will vote organic cooperation intelligently and enthusiastically is almost as monumental a task as faced the Methodist uniting conference. Therefore, all the educational procedures used in the uniting conference are applicable in local situations, of course, adapted to the local problems. People wno know are likely to act in accordance with the knowledge.

There are several kinds of facts of which parishioners should be made aware when they are being trained to cooperate with other churches. They should be instructed about the failure of small independent churches to reach certain rural groups, and the inadequate programs they carry on. Another set of facts should point out the great opportunity of the rural church. The needs of the area should be pictured as opportunities for service. Notable successes of cooperating churches should be cited. Any facts are appropriate which appeal to the motive of magnanimity, goodwill and service, and which help to conquer jealousy and competition.

Discussion is an essential element in the educative process. The people of the churches should be given every opportunity to consider the proposals from all angles. All details which have a bearing upon the situation are important. Adverse elements must be taken into account, but not be permitted to dominate a situation.

The principal thing to be remembered at this point is that the work of the church depends upon the enlightened interest and convictions of its members. If local churches are to cooperate effectively, it can be only through the enlightened and zealous action of the laymen. Through education they can be won to believe in and support cooperation.

6. The Fellowship Element

We have seen that if two churches in a community are asked to work out a plan for cooperation, they may balk and refuse to have anything to do with it. If, however, the church leaders present a program for carrying out a specific enterprise or successfully get the churches working together without any previous discussion of the abstract question of cooperation, they may work together with joy.

There is advantage of getting churches to work together first, and afterwards deciding that they will work together. This method may seem to have an element of betrayal or insincerity. Not so. It is simply to follow a psychological fact: that in practice people will often do things their minds tell them they should do, whereas, if they are presented with the plan as an abstract problem, their prejudices and grievances have time to contravene their best judgments. It is a method of achieving Christian fellowship so that comradeship may have a bearing upon deciding the relationship between heretofore independent groups.

It may be noted that the Christian church was a powerful informal fellowship before it was organized. These early followers of Jesus became a church before they decided to be one. When independent churches are brought into a dynamic fellowship before they are organized, the longest step toward inter-church cooperation has been taken. In fact, if the final step never receives formal approval, the fellowship will in itself have identity and strength.

7. The Dynamic Element

Inter-church cooperation and unity is a practical expedient which is necessitated by the conditions of our times. That is a fact. Inter-church cooperation is practical. More than that, in some places there must

be interdenominational cooperation or nothing or chaos. There is no other alternative. It is also a matter of the wise use of money, of a better program, of church efficiency. Any steps taken to make a church more efficient are commendable even when not necessary. Moreover, there is no conflict between spirituality and efficiency.

Yet, any effort to bring about church cooperation as a practical expedient only will inevitably end in futility. The function of the church is a spiritual function, and a dynamic spiritual element must remain at the core of everything the church does or it will fail in its major objectives. Church cooperation is spiritual or it does not amount to much.

One of the glorious things about this modern movement toward cooperation is that it conforms to the central teachings of Jesus. It is consistent with the gospel of brotherhood, of unity among the followers of Jesus. It is a call to work together even as did the disciples who never could see eye to eye. It recognizes that the church and the community can not come to their full selves spiritually unless each individual makes his best and unique contribution. It believes in inclusiveness, rather than in rigid exclusiveness, in embracing diverse elements in one whole rather than dividing Christians into categories and classes. The church is like a symphony orchestra with many instruments making harmony; not like an orchestra of bass drums. The church must make the people of the community one in Christ, or it is not a church of Christ.

Another evidence of the inspired nature of church cooperation is found in the spiritual results which it achieves. Churches and individuals have been redeemed to newness of life through the experience of cooperation. Communities have been reborn. Without spirituality inter-church cooperation may be efficient, or even popular, but not completely vital. With the spiritual element at the center it has the force of a revival. There is an evangelistic element in cooperation. I have seen nothing more contagious and dynamic in American rural life than that.

8. Conclusion

What techniques have been found effective in developing unity and cooperation among rural churches? Those techniques are most fruitful which bring about a unity which recognizes the individual as an unique entity in the church and which upholds the principle of unity-in-diversity and diversity-in-unity. In this technique are several elements which we have discussed. These are, a careful survey of facts to determine the course of action, starting where conditions are ready for cooperation, taking one step at a time, beginning with first steps, starting with all groups and thus having cooperation in the first acts of study and planning, educating the laity to the need for and the possibilities of cooperation, nurturing fellowship before organization, and making cooperation dynamic by making meaningful the spirituality that it naturally possesses.

Who will do most to advance cooperation: those who run or those who walk? We look for progress to those who keep their feet on the ground, and their eyes on the goal, and who press on with vigor, taking slow steps, sometimes retracing steps. Unity will not be achieved by those who leap and jump and sprint. Unity and cooperation must exist in the heart first, and

things of the heart grow slowly. Therefore, church unity will come mostly through the efforts of those who have a patient passion for it. Finally, if unity comes through walking and not through running, there are a lot of people who must do a lot of walking to reach the goal of church cooperation and unity of which many dream but toward which all do not have the patience to walk.

Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletins are sent regularly, ten times a year, to all members. The Christian Rural Fellowship is a membership organization open to all who are interested in its purposes: To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.

There are four types of membership: Subscribing $1.00; Contributing $5.00; Sustaining $10; Patron $25. All members also receive Agricultural Missions Notes published quarterly by the Agricultural Missions Foundation and the regular Fellowship news letter in addition to the Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletins.

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